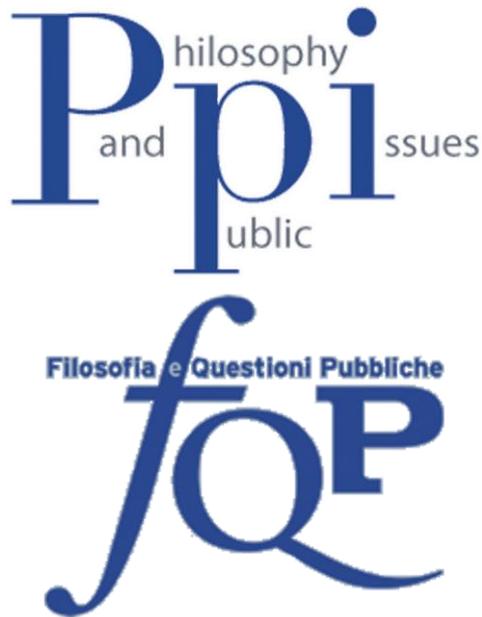


SYMPOSIUM
PROBLEMS AND METHODS IN GLOBAL THINKING



WHAT IS ORIENTATION IN GLOBAL THINKING?
A KANTIAN INQUIRY
RESPONSES TO CRITICS

BY
KATRIN FLIKSCHUH

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What is Orientation in Global Thinking? A Kantian Inquiry *Responses to Critics*

Katrin Flikschuh

I want to begin by thanking both the editor, Corrado Fumagalli, and my critics for having made possible this Special Issue on *What is Orientation in Global Thinking? A Kantian Inquiry*. I am immensely grateful to each of them for their attentive reading and insightful comments and constructive criticisms. *WOT* (= Flikschuh 2017) is surely not an easy read – as Dorothea Gädeke notes, it is a highly personal book in which I attempt to work through my own confusions about the global justice debate but also – perhaps in a way *more* so – about the nature of philosophical thinking in our self-consciously global age. Because it is so personal, the book combines source materials – Kant, contemporary liberal thought, African philosophy – that would not normally be regarded as natural bed-fellows. This makes it challenging for any readers, i.e. most, who do not share this idiosyncratic combination of interests. All four of my critics have adopted the only sensible approach – that of coming at the book each from their particular philosophical perspectives and areas of expertise. This has enabled me to reflect on aspects of *WOT* in ways that had not occurred to me before, such as Uchenna Okeja’s notion of a “usable past” or Dorothea Gädeke’s query about the

book's relation to non-liberal, or better: non-Rawlsian, strands of contemporary Western political thinking. Other points of dialogue and critique are more familiar to me: Arthur Ripstein's reading of innate right and Abraham Olivier's phenomenological probing of the limits of Kantianism. I will never persuade Ripstein of the merits of my views of innate right; equally, Olivier will never persuade me of the superiority of the phenomenological method over transcendental idealism (though he is in fact coming dangerously close!). Yet each time we start the argument anew, aspects of our respective disagreements become more nuanced. In both cases – whether by raising considerations that had not even occurred to me before, or by revisiting old disagreements anew – it has been a genuinely pleasure for me to engage and to respond as best I can.

Because *WOT* is such a mixed bag, and because each respondent therefore had to come at it from their particular perspective, I decided not to look for any overarching themes and criticism but to respond instead to each critic individually, pointing to differences or overlaps where these emerge naturally. This has however raised the issue of “right order” of responses – there isn't really one. I had initially intended a completely random order, but my sense is that no sequence ever appears fully random to us, even when it is meant to be. I then thought about paring the more Kantian responses on the one hand and the less Kantian responses on the other hand – but that, too, seemed to send the wrong signal. In the end I decided to begin with my response to Dorothea Gädeke, since her contribution is perhaps most overtly concerned with the overall shape and structure of the book. There follows Abraham Olivier's phenomenological take on my Kantian approach to conceptual loss – Olivier's contribution, too, makes a primarily methodological point. Arthur Ripstein's discussion of some of the more substantive aspects of my use of Kant sits naturally enough with Olivier's methodological focus on Kant.

Finally, it seemed to me fitting to conclude with Uchenna Okeja's notion of a construction a "usable past" as among the most important intended take-home lessons, certainly for me, of *WOT*.

I

Dorothea Gädeke, "Whose (Global) Thinking?"

Dorothea Gädeke offers a careful immanent reconstruction of the broad movement of thought through the book of which she rightly points out that it seeks to synthesize diverse bodies of literature in the service of an over-arching goal that is not immediately obvious. I am especially grateful to Gädeke for giving me the benefit of the doubt at several junctures at which her intuitive response would be to be more critical. Gädeke seeks to understand what might be going on in the book methodologically and substantively – hers is a sympathetic, highly attentive reading that nonetheless leaves her with several worries. The two most prominent worries relate to my ambivalent use of the plural personal pronoun 'we' on the one hand and my equally ambivalent use of the term 'global' on the other hand. Reading her commentary, it is my impression that while Gädeke resolves the second ambivalence to her satisfaction, the first leaves her feeling that the book ultimately fails on its own terms at least to some extent. Thus, while Gädeke identifies a deeper connection that ties together the disparate senses of 'global' which she identifies, she also concludes that my self-confessed allegiance to Anglo-American liberal thinking ultimately prevents the book from engaging with relevant alternative perspectives – and yet this is precisely what it needed to do in its search for theoretical re-orientation.

In my response to Gädeke's commentary, I shall spend more time on the unresolved issue between us – i.e., the restricted scope

of my appeal to the first-personal plural: I speak of ‘us’ liberal theorists when I really should have extended the scope of the ‘we’ to cover a greater plurality of theoretical perspectives. There is some justice to Gädeke’s complaint, though there is also a certain irony to it. The irony is that I do not *naturally* self-identify as an “Anglo-American liberal theorist.” This is not to deny that I do in the book seek to address mainstream liberal theorists from within what I take to be, by and large, their perspective. It is true, therefore, that when I speak of ‘us’ global theorists I largely have in mind contemporary Anglo-American liberalism (although many might well complain that even then I cast the net too narrowly, focusing mainly on a version of Rawlsian liberalism to the exclusion of libertarian and consequentialist perspectives). My reason for this narrow focus was partly strategic – I wanted to avoid alienating from the get-go the very audience which I was hoping to address. I wanted to address this particular audience because the global justice debate as we know it originated from worries among John Rawls’ admirers over his theory’s own strictly domestic focus. The worry which Gädeke’s critique raises for me is not so much that I may have aligned myself with a position – Rawlsian liberalism – that is merely one (albeit dominant) theoretical perspective among many; my worry is that, since I do not in fact naturally identify with this theoretical position, I may have failed to address it in the way in which I hoped to do, i.e., from within. But it is also possible that we are splitting hairs here – that the distinction between “Anglo-American liberalism” and “critical theory,” say, or even “deconstructivism” is by and large a distinction within a philosophical tradition – call it Western – that shares rather more by way of underlying background assumptions than the family quarrels among them may lead one to believe.

I shall come back to the issue of ‘we’ below. Before doing so, I want to say something about my uses of the word ‘global’. Gädeke suggests that in my use of the term I could be taken to be referring

i.) to theorists who think about problems that are global in scope, such as problems of distributive justice, for example. Alternatively, ‘global’ could refer ii.) to ‘a debate between scholars from across the globe’ – here, the adjective would affix to theorists rather than to the object of their inquiry. Finally, ‘global’ could refer iii.) to “the philosophical aspiration for general or universal validity.” (Gädeke, 2019, 23) Now, I happen to think that the most natural way in which to interpret ‘global’ in the context of the global justice debate is the first sense identified by Gädeke. The second sense – scholars across the globe – strikes me as rather strained. There is a sense in which I might be thought to be referring to all scholars globally who work on global justice but that seems to be precluded by my restricted focus on Anglo-American liberalism. The third sense – ‘global’ as a synonym for “universally valid” seems to me erroneous: if global principles were equivalent to universally valid principles, this might seem to render things like current WTO rules, which apply globally, universally valid.

I nonetheless think there is something to Gädeke’s subsequent claim that my ambivalent usage of the term ‘global’, leads to further uncertainty over the target of my critique: is the problem of global justice an epistemic-cum-conceptual problem or is it a moral one? On the one hand, I speak of conceptual loss in relation to liberal global thinking, i.e., I diagnose a presumed epistemic state of affairs – namely, a lack of fit between dominant liberal concepts and actual global realities. On the other hand, I also make a moral demand when I argue, as Gädeke puts it, that “liberals *should* acknowledge the limitations of their own framework for the sake of being able to reflexively orient themselves and acting morally in their practice of thinking” (Gädeke 2019, 32). For Gädeke, these two concerns initially “pull in different directions” (*ibid.*): the epistemic problem can be stated independently of the moral one, and *vice versa*. More specifically, liberal theorists’ lack of interest in others’ points of view would be morally problematic even if liberal

theory did not confront conceptual loss. This is obviously correct. On the other hand, I am not so sure that the reverse holds – i.e., that one can talk of conceptual loss independently of its moral implications. My sense is that loss of concepts is a moral problem just as much as it is an epistemic one, at least if one takes the view that meaning guides practice and believes practice, in turn, to be essentially norm governed. I therefore see less of a distance between the epistemic and moral aspects of my diagnosis. Gädeke herself resolves the issue slightly differently when she says that:

One might understand Flikschuh’s claim that liberal theorists may suffer from conceptual loss as an appeal to a far more fundamental anxiety, namely the foreboding of a possible decline of the liberal order, both political and philosophical (Gädeke 2019, 34).

She continues:

Even though liberalism has been the dominant philosophical and practical paradigm rather than a marginalized culture, the foreshadowing of its decline may confront liberals with the end of the world as they know it in a way similar to the Crow’s loss of the world. And it may occasion a similar “heightened state of anxiety” that urges fundamentally rethinking liberal theory and practice even if this anxiety is not (yet) consciously experienced or even acknowledged. (*ibid.*, 35).

I have nothing to disagree with here – it seems to me that the chief difference between us lies, first, in the fact that I draw a less strict division between epistemic and moral dimensions of conceptual loss than Gädeke does and second, that I take moral disorientation to be an immediate consequence of loss of

conceptual orientation irrespective of whether or not the way of life under threat is also a politically dominant one.

Gädeke perceives greater distance between my position and her interpretive suggestion. According to her, conceptual loss and ensuing liberal anxiety might be taken to reflect awareness of ‘shifting global power’ – liberal theory may be anxious about its declining power. This anxiety would be political or strategic more than moral in nature. Gädeke believes that I “shy away from such a stronger claim” in part because of my allegiance to ‘Anglo-American liberalism.’ My allegiance in this respect prevents me from engaging with “theorists – in the Western world and beyond – who have indeed posed the methodological question of how to think globally in a world marked by global power asymmetries perpetuating colonial realities from within non-liberal philosophical frameworks” (Gädeke 2019, 35). In the end, my analysis “remains tied, in a peculiar sense, to an inward-facing critical engagement with liberalism and a liberal audience” (*ibid.*, 36).

This takes us back to the problem of the restricted ‘we’. I confess that I am somewhat puzzled by that aspect of Gädeke’s critique that charges me with neglect of alternative perspectives to the dominant liberal one. Chapters 4 and 5 of *WOT* deal with Enlightenment history and related colonial legacies; chapters 6 and 7 consider in some detail African theoretical alternatives to two dominant themes in liberal global justice debates – human rights and the idea of statehood in general. Given this, it seems strange to say that the book deals neither with colonial legacies nor with different theoretical perspectives, including those that challenge liberal politics and morality in certain respects. Gädeke leaves these aspects of the book largely unmentioned; nor does she specify which particular theoretical positions I should in her view have engaged with. Given that I do in fact engage with some non-

Western perspectives, my guess is that she must primarily have in mind non-Anglo-American Western theories – including, perhaps, Critical Theory, (Post-)Structuralism and Deconstructivism.

It is true that I do not thematize power relations in a manner in which a critical theorist or a deconstructivist might do – my focus may be said to be on the ‘power of ideas’ over ‘power politics’. A first response to Gädeke’s worry may be that the attempt to engaging Kant, Rawlsian liberalism, and African philosophical perspectives with one other is already a rather tall order; including yet more diverse theoretical perspectives within the covers of a single book would have yielded ever greater diminishing returns. However, this response hardly answers to the principle behind Gädeke’s complaint, which has something to do with the exclusion of non-mainstream theoretical perspectives. Why not deconstructivism, say? I think there are three reasons for my omission of some of the theoretical approaches which I believe Gädeke to have in mind; two of these reasons are of a more personal nature, while the third is more critical. First, while I said at the outset that I do not feel naturally at home in Anglo-American liberalism, I do feel closer to it than I do to Critical Theory or Deconstructivism. In part, this is simply a function of my education – as much as her proclivity towards the mentioned alternative approaches may be a function of Gädeke’s education. There is a discernible link, moreover, between Kant and contemporary Anglo-American liberalism. The latter does not approach Kant’s philosophy in ways I myself favour, nonetheless, much of Anglo-American liberalism is self-avowedly Kantian. This makes it a more natural interlocutor for me. Of course, Critical Theory and Deconstructivism, too, are inspired by Kant – but in both cases, the engagement is more adversarial. This says nothing in itself about the relative merits of Anglo-American liberalism, Critical Theory, or Deconstructivism – it simply means that, as a

Kantian, I am more likely to be drawn to approaches that see merit in Kant.

The second reason, which is also personal, relates to my engagement with modern African philosophy. Again, one might well complain that the particular African philosophers which I focus on are themselves testimony to my Anglo-American biases: Segun Gbadegesin, Kwame Gyekye, Ifeanyi Menkiti, and especially Kwasi Wiredu are all ‘products,’ to a lesser or greater degree, of Anglo-American university education. All adopt a broadly analytic method of philosophical reasoning and all are well versed in the history of Western philosophy. So perhaps I am drawn to positions that affirm my own biases. But this is not the whole of it. I remember a passage in one of Wiredu’s books in which, commenting on the history of Western philosophy, he says something like the following: “it takes considerable self-discipline for an African philosopher to find anything of value in the thought of a Hume or a Kant.” The suggestion is that such self-discipline is nonetheless necessary, and this for a variety of reasons: to understand the tradition, to seek to find value in it beyond its undoubted racism, to engage in productive critique. Most of all, perhaps, Wiredu’s concern was to try to establish some kind of philosophical dialogue with the Western tradition. I find Wiredu’s position admirable – and it is one shared by many contemporary African philosophers, who have left the door open to an engagement with the Western tradition despite the enormous amount of intellectual, moral and political harm which it has visited upon the continent.

This takes me to my third and final reason, which is less personal and more critical – though I shall qualify that criticism. Russell Berman concludes his excellent *Enlightenment or Empire. Colonial Discourse in German Culture* (Berman 1998) with some reflections on what he calls “the Myth of Anti-Colonialism.” By

the latter, he means those intellectual traditions which, though they themselves grew out of the Western canon, conscientiously set themselves apart from that canon in order to critique it. Berman's immediate remarks focus on prominent critics of the Enlightenment, including Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault, who made cause with anti-colonial and anti-Apartheid struggles as part of their broader critique of Western 'logo-centrism'. As Berman points out, there is a danger of confusing means and ends:

If the strict identification of Enlightenment with colonialism suggests a corollary equation of anticolonialism and the critique of the Enlightenment – to attack colonialism it appears imperative to attack the Enlightenment and Enlightenment intellectuals -- then when does the critique of colonialism begin to become a vehicle for, perhaps even only a pretext for, attacks on [Enlightenment] intellectuals? (Berman 1998, 205-206).

I am not suggesting that the theorists who, as Gädeke says, "have posed the methodological question of how to think globally in a world marked by global power asymmetries perpetuating colonial realities" (Gädeke, 35) are using colonial critique as a vehicle for more broadside attacks on, say, Anglo-American liberalism. But there is a danger about theories positioning themselves as spokespersons for the oppressed when their real target is the philosophically and politically dominant tradition against which they are reacting. That danger consists in these theories' insufficiently self-critical stance towards their own background motivations and a related tendency to proclaim themselves as above suspicion, as it were, merely on the grounds of critiquing the dominant philosophical tradition. As I said, I do wish to qualify this critical point regarding deconstructivist and other alternative approaches. It is true that, when all is said and

done these alternative approaches do at least acknowledge there to be a problem – even though they also often tend to exempt themselves in questionable ways from the diagnosed problem. As Gädeke says, the focus of these alternative approaches largely lies in querying particular power relations in contemporary world politics. By contrast, my own emphasis has been more on the power of ideas. Nonetheless, critical theorists, de-constructivists, post-colonial thinkers do acknowledge the problematic nature of Western political and philosophical dominance. Contemporary Anglo-American political thinking, by contrast, appears largely to have shielded itself from confronting its own legacies in this regard. Ultimately, I think, much of the book was driven by my asking myself why contemporary liberal thought appears on the whole to be so oblivious of its own problematic relation to the global political realities it diagnoses. I adopted the first-personal plural address in relation to Anglo-American (analytic) political philosophy precisely because I wanted to trial a self-critique of the kind I found to be so curiously lacking in this tradition.

II

Abraham Olivier, “Lost in Orientation”

Abraham Olivier critically engages with my ‘flexible’ or ‘contextualist’ Kantianism, that is, with my contention, initially sketched at the end of chapter 1 and then further developed in Chapter 5, that we can usefully deploy Kant’s epistemological division of labour between a priori concepts (categories) and sensible intuition to argue the rational intelligibility of culturally divergent conceptual frameworks. In contrast to Arthur Ripstein, who believes that no such contextualism is necessary, Olivier’s concern is that I do not go far enough. My basic argument in *WOT* is as follows: while Kant insists on the a priori status of the

categories of the understanding as functions of epistemic judgement in general, his endorsement of sensible intuition as a second “root of knowledge” leaves room for contingent variability in the synthesis of form (categories) and matter (sensible intuitions) into particular judgements about empirical objects. While the categories as functions of epistemic judgement – quantity, quality, relation – are invariant, the content of particular judgements about objects is context dependent. Contextually diverse sensible intuitions account for diversity at the level of empirical concept formation, while invariability at the level of formal functions of judgement secures rational intelligibility across culturally diverse conceptual frameworks. As Olivier notes, the aim is to show that conceptual and normative diversity across cultures need not be seen as undermining Kantian universality claims so long as the latter are restricted to the forms of human understanding and, by extension, the form of practical reasoning; what matters is not that we do in fact share the same conceptual framework and substantive moral principles but that we can acknowledge others’ divergence from ours as rationally intelligible. As I note in my response to Ripstein, below, this is a guiding idea of my interpretation of the nomadic passages in the *Doctrine of Right*.

As both Ripstein and Olivier note, my contextual Kantianism is partly indebted to David Velleman’s *Foundations for Moral Relativism* (Velleman 2011). Velleman there develops what he calls an indexical, or agent-relative, account of practical reasoning. A candidate reason for action has to be a reason *for* the person whose action the reason purports to guide. Velleman’s indexical account superficially resembles Bernard Williams’ distinction between internal and external reasons. For Williams, external reasons have the structure of impersonal commandments from on high – they are addressed to all and sundry and hence to no one in particular. Williams takes the categorical imperative to have such an impersonal command structure. Yet external reasons cannot

motivate agents – only internal reasons can do so, since only they are internally connected to a particular agent’s particular motivational set. While Velleman’s indexical reasons might be thought to resemble Williams’ internal reasons, Velleman in fact takes his cue from Kant’s first-personal standpoint – a feature of Kantian philosophical reasoning which William overlooks. Velleman’s claim is not that reasons must link up with an agent’s “motivational set,” i.e. with their particular desires, plans, and projects, but that reasons of action must be *intelligible*, as reasons, to the agent herself. The indexicality of practical reasons should not be confused, therefore, with Williams’ scepticism about practical reason. Yet while Velleman’s indexicality requirement is recognizably Kantian – it takes the first-personal standpoint and asks ‘what ought *I* do?’ – his account takes a Humean turn when it comes to the communicability of reasons across culturally different contexts. For Velleman, given the indexicality requirement, reasons for action can differ from person to person: reason for action that is valid for you need not therefore also be valid for me. Reasons for action are most likely to differ across culturally different contexts. A chief cause of intra-cultural convergence is the pull of sociality: we want to render ourselves intelligible to each other, and we do so by coming to share reasons for action (and reasons for belief). There is considerably greater divergence in reasons for action across different cultures. But here, too, the pull of sociality – less direct and therefore less intensive – does lead people from different cultural backgrounds to engage with one another and to seek to render themselves intelligible to each other. Crucially, this needn’t result in a *convergence* of reasons; in rendering ourselves intelligible to each other cross-culturally we can come to appreciate that even if, given our different respective background contexts, x-ing cannot be a reason for action for me, it may well be a reason for action for you.

I have spent some time outlining Velleman's position because it seems to me that aspects of Olivier's response to my Kantian contextualism are not unlike Velleman's naturalised Kantianism. According to my Kantian contextualism, recall, there are a priori constraints on what can count as reasons – epistemic or practical: these are the categories of the understanding on the one hand and the categorical imperative/universal principle of Right on the other hand. For Velleman, by contrast, no strong a priori commitments attach to his attribution to humans of the pull towards sociality and mutual intelligibility. Velleman substitutes a certain kind of naturalism about human sociability for Kantian a priori commitments. Part of Olivier's response to my Kantian contextualism seems to me to go in a similar direction: Olivier appeals to our capacity for language and communication as a naturalized form of Kantian reason-giving. At times, however, Olivier seems to me to be pursuing a more ambitious strategy. While a naturalized account of reason-giving dissolves the distinction between a priori formal categories and a posteriori substantive reasons, Olivier seems at times to wish to hold on to the distinction even whilst rendering a priori categories revisable. If so, one ends up with three alternative accounts of reason-giving. First, on the Kantian contextualist picture which I favour, we have non-revisable a priori categories (or, equivalently for practical reason, the categorical imperative), which define the structure of human reason and which, as such, uniformly guide persons' different because context-specific substantive judgements. Here intelligibility is assured through the shared formal structure of reason. Second, we have Velleman's indexical account, according to which different substantive reasons hold for different people in different cultural and social contexts but the pull of sociality will encourage people to try to render themselves intelligible to each other. Third, there is what I take to be Olivier's position, in which we retain the distinction between a priori categories and

substantive or ordinary reasons, but treat both as revisable. I want to spent the remainder of my response discussing this third possibility. I find it intriguing but I am not altogether sure what to make of it. In particular, I am not sure that it is possible to retain the distinction between revisable pure categories and revisable empirical concepts – i.e., I am not sure whether Olivier’s position does not collapse back into a Kantian naturalism.

The background of Olivier’s critique of my position is Paulin Hountondji’s critique of Alexis Kagame’s “attempt to translate Aristotle’s metaphysical categories into his own language, Kinyarwanda” (Oliver 2019, 51). While Aristotle unwittingly mistook Greek concepts for universal ones, Kagame wittingly repeats Aristotle’s mistake, when he underwrites Aristotle’s particularist metaphysics as a universal one. One might say that I stand to Kant as Kagame stands to Aristotle: while Kant unwittingly turned Aristotle’s (particularistic) metaphysical concepts into a priori categories of the understanding, I myself wittingly underwrite Kant’s mistake in this regard. One response to Olivier’s challenge may be to say that if one is interested in developing a *Kantian* form of contextualism, there is only so far one can go. So, for example, one might say that one cannot give up on (some version of) the noumenal/phenomenal distinction whilst still wishing to subscribe to a plausible form of ‘Kantianism’. But of course, the reply to this may simply be, so much the worse for Kantian contextualism. Unless, of course, Olivier’s alternative proposal fails. Recall that Olivier wishes to hold on to some kind of distinction between a priori and empirical concepts whilst regarding both as revisable. As noted, Velleman gives up on that distinction – he offers a naturalized version of Kantian practical reasoning. My impression is that Kwasi Wiredu, whom Olivier discusses at length, pursues a similar kind of naturalized Kantianism – indeed, the linguistic turn which replaced Kant’s transcendental deduction with the structure of linguistic

competence was pioneered by Karl-Otto Apel and taken up by Jürgen Habermas with the express purpose of naturalizing Kant. Yet there is a difference between naturalizing Kant's a priori categories, thereby in effect dissolving their distinctive status *vis-à-vis* ordinary concepts, and retaining the a priori / a posteriori distinction whilst seeking to render a priori categories amenable to critical revision. Following on from his discussion of Wiredu on language competence, Olivier says,

the only universal [Wiredu and Hountondji] seem to take to come with a priori necessity, is our shared rational capacity to form universals. Viewed in Kantian terms, this capacity concerns the formation not only of empirical concepts but also of pure concepts that we take to be a priori categories. Accordingly, the a priori categories are subject to the capacity for concept formation. This allows one to conclude that although the categories of understanding are the condition of forming empirical concepts, they are themselves conditioned by the search for shared universals within and across empirical concepts. (Olivier 2019, 56).

I take Olivier to be saying that Wiredu (and Hountondji) work with a metaphysically less demanding baseline than either Aristotle or, following him, Kant: they merely predicate of persons the rational capacity to form (revisable) universals. So far, it seems to me, strict a priori has simply been relocated from Kant's categories to the rational capacity to form revisable universals. I want to make two points here. First, the non-revisable rational capacity in question seems to have the status of a black box: we are not told what this capacity consists in. If we were to unpack the notion we would, I suspect, end up with a set of specifications that constitute non-revisable criteria for 'rationality.' But this looks

suspiciously like a version of the Kantian categories – the latter too, according to Kant, simply spell out conditions of rational understanding. Second, and relatedly, revisable universals seem to me not to be universals in the strict sense of possessing unconditional validity. Revisable universals have the flavour more of generally valid concepts; this makes revisable universals hard to distinguish from ordinary concepts. In short, it seems to me that if we have a non-revisable rational capacity for the formation of revisable universals, we have not really advanced beyond the Kantian distinction between a priori and empirical concepts. If, on the other hand, we have advanced beyond the Kantian distinction, we cannot hang on to a notion of universal in the sense of unconditional (a priori) validity. Olivier disagrees. He denies that to maintain that the categories are revisable is to deny their a priori status:

My focus is exactly on the capacity to know, rather than on the empirical knower. My emphasis is on the very Kantian premise that all judgements and concepts are based on the capacity of the understanding to judge by forming concepts. This capacity is not about an empirical, personal knower – it is rather about the impersonal activity of the understanding that all humans share. (Olivier 2019, 57).

Olivier thus wishes to hold fast to the a priori/a posteriori distinction despite insisting of the revisability of the categories. In fact, the latter must be revisable: “(i)f the capacity for judgement is itself the source of the categories, then it must also be capable of producing them. Then the act of judgement must go along with a self-consciousness of its capacity to produce the categories as rules of valid judgement” (*ibid.*, 58). Olivier thus depicts the categories as originating in the capacity to judge (or, equivalently, to reason).

Moreover, he goes on to speak of “the spontaneous capacity of the understanding to revise all concepts, and eventually to produce others according to its cognitive needs” (*ibid.*).

I do not think that, for Kant, the capacity for understanding is the *source* of the categories: rather, the categories *specify* what the capacity for understanding/judgement consists in. There is no antecedently given capacity for understanding that produces the categories – instead human understanding takes the form of employing the categories, in conjunction with sensible intuition, as functions of judgements about objects. In positing a capacity for understanding that is itself separate from and antecedent to the categories Olivier seems to me in effect to posit a mind that exists independently of its functions of judgement. But that does not seem to me to be a very Kantian premise. Kant’s strategy is to ask which cognitive capacities we must predicate of ourselves given our experience of objects outside of us. This is in effect to offer a reflexive account of the necessary structure of the human mind consistent with our empirical experience of objects. The Kantian claim is not that we are the source of our capacity for judgement, such that we could re-structure our minds’ functions more or less at will. This is what Olivier’s proposal seems to me to amount to, but that proposal seems to me to credit humans with rather more power over themselves than Kant is willing to concede.

None of the above is to deny that Kant may have been mistaken about the particular categories which he identifies as a priori necessary. Recall Olivier’s initial starting point: Hountondji’s critique of Kagame’s uncritical absorption of Aristotelian metaphysics. Insofar as Kant derives the categories from Aristotelian forms of judgement, he too may be said to have absorbed Aristotle uncritically: Kant may be correct in vindicating a priori categories and yet be mistaken about which these are. This is different from Olivier’s suggested revisability of the categories

as categories – we are simply saying that Kant may have mis-identified the relevant non-revisable categories. Has he? This is obviously too large an issue to go into here; suffice it to note that the issue of the completeness or otherwise of Kant’s table of the categories has come up repeatedly among Kant scholars. I shall at this point simply conclude with a reminder of the categories which Kant identifies as functions of judgements about objects: quantity, quality, relation. The claim is that all human knowers make judgements about there being objects; all human knowers predicate qualities of these objects; all human knowers relate objects to each other in various ways. This does not strike me as too contentious a set of claims to make about what human knowers non-revisably share as knowers, i.e. the capacity to judge.

III

Arthur Ripstein, “Leaving the State of Nature”

Arthur Ripstein’s response focuses on my interpretation of innate right in Kant’s *Doctrine of Right* on the one hand and on my claim of a restricted Kantian duty of state entrance on the other hand. In chapter 3 of *WOT* I argue in favour of what I call a non-foundationalist and non-individualist account of innate right that treats the latter as a necessary *formal* presupposition of reciprocally raised property claims. More specifically, I argue that Kant’s innate right affirms others’ acknowledgement of a person’s reciprocally equal legal status as a necessary presupposition of the attribution to a person of substantive rights. The basic idea is simple: it is not possible for one to have substantive rights unless others accord one the moral status of a possible rightsholder. To be accorded such status is to be treated by others as someone who is accountable for all and only all his own actions, who is therefore capable of acting in her own right, and who cannot be held

accountable for actions which she did not commit – in short, it is to be accorded the status of a legally competent agent. In *WOT I* claim that, thus interpreted, the innate right is not itself capable of empirical instantiation: as a status right, it is noumenal in kind. Given its noumenal quality, the innate right is not a substantive right, and not being a substantive right, it is not itself empirically instantiable. Insofar as the innate right is nonetheless a morally necessary presupposition of all substantive rights, it is instantiated indirectly through the substantive rights it makes morally possible: each time we are accorded substantive rights – the right to property, for example – our moral status as legally accountable agents is thereby affirmed. This means, further, that the moral quality of the substantive rights does not consist in the material entitlements or benefits they confer but in the underlying relation of legal equality between persons presupposed by substantive rights.

To say that the innate right amounts to ‘nothing more’ than the reciprocal acknowledgement of rights claimants’ equal legal status may look like a meagre result. Besides, the proposed interpretation may seem to tell us nothing about rights we did not know already: we knew already that all rightsholders have equal legal status under the law! Ripstein suggests that, on my reading, the innate right,

simply provides the framework within which people are reciprocally entitled to make claims against each other within a system of positive law. As a framework right, it structures the justification of particular claims without giving rise to any; instead, the matter of those claims must come from elsewhere (Ripstein 2019, 69).

Ripstein believes that I accord the innate right little if any moral importance – I simply treat it as a “framework right”, or a structuring device, for positive law. I do not myself speak of the innate right as a framework right – I believe the term reflects a central misunderstanding of my position. I view the innate right as a morally necessary presupposition of substantive rights: far from thinking it morally inconsequential because merely formal, my claim is that it is precisely the formal character of innate right – reciprocally acknowledged equality in legal status – that lends the innate right its moral quality. Evidently, from a Kantian perspective, the morality of rights cannot be based on material considerations but must be of a noumenal character, which is to say, that it must be formal. If Ripstein overlooks the critical insight which my analysis is meant to track, this may be because he fails to assign sufficient weight to the first-personal standpoint of recursive justification. Recursive justification is necessarily first-personal in that it regresses from a first personal experiential premise to its necessary presupposition: “I have experience of objects outside of me,” say, or “I raise a property claims against another.” Just as insight into the categories of the understanding as a necessary presupposition of the possibility of experience of objects is meant to be a critical – i.e., corrective – insight into the nature of human knowledge, so insight into the innate right as an a priori presupposition of substantive rights claims is meant to be a critical – i.e., corrective – insight into the morality of rights: what is morally important about rights is not the substantive entitlements which they accord but the strictly reciprocal moral relation which publicly enforceable rights makes possible. Rights enable us to comport ourselves towards each other in a particular kind of way – that’s what’s moral about them. Ripstein is mistaken to suggest that I take Kant to be doing no more than “analysing what is implicit in actual legal thought and practice” (Ripstein 2019, 71). The issue is not to render explicit what we already believe. The

issue is rather to demonstrate what is necessarily presupposed by that which we already believe.

One constraint of my first-personal reading of innate right is that unless persons do in fact raise substantive rights claims against each other, they will not have recursive insight into the necessary presupposition of these claims. This constraint is a direct consequence of recursive justification. Just as I can have insight into the categories of the understanding only by regressing from *my* experience of objects to its possibility conditions, so I can have insight into innate right only by regressing from *my* substantive rights claim against others to its necessary possibility conditions. Unless, therefore, I raise rights claims against others – and they against me – there is no recursive insight into innate right as necessary presupposition of those claims. I contrast recursive justification with third-personal foundationalist justification. Foundationalism starts from the affirmation of some highest order first principles or attributes which is accords to all persons – the principle of purposiveness, say, or the claim to physical integrity. It then deduces or infers lower-order principles from these and considers all persons bound by given the initial attribution to them of relevant first principles.

Ripstein finds my resort of recursive justification worrying because it suggests the absence of a mind-independent rights criterion. Ripstein wants to say that all persons have an innate right, grounded in their capacity for purposiveness and / or their bodily integrity. We claim this right against each other – it is in this sense that Ripstein regards the innate right as relational. However, the grounds of innate right are, for him, independent of the relation they make possible. The advantage of this approach is that it allows Ripstein to attribute this right to all persons equally; the disadvantage is that it begs the question as to the posited grounds: why purposiveness, why bodily integrity? Nonetheless, given his

preferred strategy of rights justification,¹ Ripstein believes that my failure to acknowledge the mind-independent validity of innate right affects my subsequent reading of Kant's position on nomads' duty of state entrance. On my account, would-be European colonizers cannot both hold nomads to be under a duty of state entrance and fail to acknowledge nomads' property claims over their lands. According to Kant's earlier property argument in the *Doctrine of Right*, the claim to rightful acquisition generates the duty of state entrance as the only condition under which such claims can become rightful. It follows that one who fails to raise a property claim against others is under no duty to enter into the civil condition with them. If Europeans settlers take nomads to be under a coercible duty of state entrance, they must suppose them to be raising property claims to the lands over which they roam. In that case, Europeans must acknowledge that these lands are not merely up for grabs. If, on the other hand, the Europeans fail to acknowledge nomads' property claims to those lands, they cannot regard them as under a coercible duty of state entrance, since it is only the act of acquisition that generates this duty. Again, the structure of the argument is first-personally recursive: it starts from what European would-be colonizers propose to do to the nomads – compel them into the civil condition – and regresses from there to the necessary presuppositions of that proposal. Kant calls the position of the European settlers 'Jesuitic,' indicating that he deems their reasoning to be duplicitous: the Europeans are fully

¹ In his response, Ripstein himself characterizes his approach as a second-personal approach, along the lines of Darwall 2006. Ripstein says that rights are second-personal in the sense of being claims against specified others – what you owe me and what I owe you. This refers to the content of rights, however, not to their justification. At the level of justification, Ripstein seems to me to proceed third-personally – i.e. he attributes to all persons an innate right to freedom (grounded in purposiveness and bodily integrity) and he then asks what follows from this with regard to other rights, such as property rights.

aware that their wish to ‘civilize’ the nomads (i.e., compel them into the civil condition) is motivated by a desire for nomadic lands.

All that said, for my argument in chapter 2 of *WOT*, the real puzzle lies in the fact Kant seems to think of the nomads as neither owning the land over which they roam nor as being in a civil condition. This in itself is not puzzling: the nomads are in a condition of “wild and lawless freedom.” One might assume that, since Kant regards the condition of wild and lawless freedom as contrary to rights, anyone can permissibly compel the nomads to give up their wild and lawless ways. Indeed, this would seem to follow from a third-personal strategy of justification, where it matters little what the nomads themselves think or do. From a first-personal strategy of justification, by contrast, what the nomads themselves think or do matters a great deal, since they can be bound only by duties whose validity for them they can acknowledge. If the nomads fail to raise property claims against each other, they simply have no reason for state entrance. The Europeans, by contrast, *are* bound by the requirements of right, if only because they invoke the language of rights, thereby revealing themselves to be cognizant of rights. Since they are cognizant of rights, they are under a moral obligation to act in accordance with the language of rights which they invoke in order to deprive the nomads of the lands. Clearly, the *Europeans* in fact do believe the nomads to own the land: they must believe this, given that they are busy looking for justifications for depriving them of those lands. The nomads, by contrast, may well have a non-proprietary relation to the land over which they roam.

Here, then, is the puzzle: Kant demands that the settlers interact on contractual terms with the nomads whilst admonishing them not to take advantage of the nomads’ ignorance of contracts. In *WOT* I argue that Kant takes Europeans to be bound by the morality of rights irrespective of whether the nomads are so

bound: for all the settlers know, the nomads are operating with very different principles. Ripstein believes that this puzzling result could have been avoided if I had treated the innate right of each not as a recursively justified formal presupposition of substantive rights claims but had interpreted it more in the spirit of an independent basic right that we must accord to all persons with whom we come into contact, including nomads (or pastoral peoples as Ripstein prefers to call them). More generally, Ripstein thinks it implausible that there may be any people at all who do not regulate their social context, including structures of political authority, on the basis of some kind of property regime. Ripstein avers that, “in the *Doctrine of Right* Kant refers to societies that he describes as ‘compatible with rights (e.g. conjugal, paternal, domestic societies in general as well as many others’ (Kant 1797, 306). But those societies could only be compatible with rights if there were at least some claims between their members” (Ripstein 2019, 75) A little later Ripstein goes on to say that,

Kant’s examples of pastoral peoples requiring large amounts of land to sustain themselves are not examples of dissociated individuals in a state of nature, who do not encounter each other and so make no proprietary claims against each other. They are instead peoples. “People” is a defined term for Kant, “a multitude of human beings” (Kant 1797, 311). Understanding such peoples and nations as already in a rightful condition also identifies the distinctive wrong of colonial conquest. It is not merely forcing people into a form of social ordering in which they do not feel at home; it is, further, depriving them of something like their sovereignty (Ripstein 79-80).

I read the relevant Kant passages differently: to say that conjugal and paternal relations are *compatible* with rights is not to

say that they are rights-based relations; indeed, it is precisely to suggest that they are *not* rights-based relations. More generally, Kant thinks of the pre-civil condition as a social condition – unlike the individualist Hobbesian state of nature, Kant explicitly says that the state of nature should be contrasted, not with the social condition but with the civil condition. It follows that not every social condition is a civil condition. There may be many social conditions that are adventitiously compatible with rights (*rechtmässig*). However, this does not in itself makes them rights-based (*rechtliche*) conditions. For Kant, then, not every form of social organization constitutes a civil condition. Indeed, it would be odd to say of nomadic peoples that they are in a civil condition – a settled, property-based, territorially delimited form of political association. To say this is surely to overlook the distinctiveness of the nomadic way of life as one that is precisely not settled.

While Ripstein believes that the apparent puzzle I diagnose in respect of the asymmetric rights relation between European settlers and nomadic peoples would dissolve if I were simply to attribute innate right and indeed property regimes to all social formations, my opposite worry is that doing so may repeat the mistake typically made by colonizers. Colonial history is replete with examples of colonizers reading their own value schemes back into the cultures they encountered and justified colonizing on those grounds. The attribution to or imposition on peoples of property regimes which they did not possess – in North America, Africa, and Australia – remains one of the chief sources of colonially inherited grievances. That imposition drastically altered established social and authority relations as well as undermining many peoples' non-proprietary relationships to their lands. It seems to me that progress in inter-cultural moral and political relations is unlikely to lie in our assuring ourselves that others' beliefs, values and forms of organization are just variants of our own. We need instead to learn to accept the rational intelligibility

of radically different forms of social and political organization. This is the chief reason for why I interpret Kant's nomadic passages in the way I did. I would not go so far as to say that Kant himself knew how to respond to the nomads – to the contrary, my sense is that he only knew how to respond to would-be European settlers. But on that score, he seems to me to have been fairly clear: do not appeal to the language of rights when proposing to act in ways of which you know, given that you do appeal to the language of rights, that it would be wrong so to act. This is not an insight that could be had in the absence of recursive justification.

IV

Uchenna Okeja. Constructing a Usable Past

In his insightful contribution, Uchenna Okeja introduces two notions with reference to which to extend what he correctly regards, like Gädeke, as my relatively limited attempt to diagnose conceptual loss in contemporary liberalism. Okeja speaks of constructing a 'usable past' on the one hand and of the need for 'conceptual repair' on the other hand. The first notion he borrows from Richard Rorty's treatment of national identity formation in *Achieving Our Country*; the second emerges in the course of Okeja's discussion of African philosophers' efforts at mental decolonization. A deep moral-cum-philosophical concern animates Okeja's contribution. The notion of a "usable past," especially when dissociated from Rorty's more up-beat narrative of the US experience, alludes to some of the lasting effects of the experience of cultural trauma so hauntingly analyzed by Jonathan Lear in *Radical Hope* (Lear 2006). While Lear, too, ends on an optimistic note – he treats Chief Plenty Coup's burial of his coup stick as an act of resolution towards a possible Crow future – Okeja confronts the enormity of cultural devastation that continues to

face African peoples and philosophers now that the former colonizers have physically withdrawn from the continent. Okeja notes that colonialism was essentially a project of “conceptual realignment.” By this, he means the re-ordering of African social and political realities in accordance with European colonizers’ conceptions of how things *should* be done: polygamy became ‘unnatural’ and monogamy the only proper type of household arrangement; rule by custom was ‘backward’ and had to be replaced with rule by law; polytheistic beliefs reflected mental ‘primitivism’ and needed to be turned into monotheistic commitments. And so on, relentlessly and ruthlessly.

Okeja follows Ifeanyi Menkiti and Kwasi Wiredu in diagnosing the ensuing conceptual dislocation as among the root causes of continuing political instability in Africa: if one cannot act in accordance with one’s beliefs – if, that is, one is compelled to act in accordance with others’ beliefs – one cannot act at all. To be deprived of one’s agency through cultural denigration and political and legal disempowerment is corrosive of one’s sense of self-worth. Hence the continuing emphasis among African philosophers on mental decolonization – on the task, that is, of freeing Africans from the feelings of shame and humiliation which they often associate even now with their rich cultural and intellectual heritage.

Okeja deploys the notion of a ‘usable past’ in the course of forging a connection between what he takes to be the broader point of my reading of Kant’s nomadic encounter and the task of mental decolonization. As I note in response to Ripstein’s contribution, chapter 2 of *WOT* argues that, when confronted with nomadic peoples who (for all Kant knows) fail to raise private property claims, Kant acknowledges that, by his own argument, nomads therefore have no duty of state entrance. The resulting incongruity stems from Kant’s insistence earlier in the *Doctrine of*

Right on state entrance as an a priori, hence universal and unconditionally valid duty. On my reading, the nomadic passage brings it home to Kant that this duty can hold unconditionally only for those who do in fact raise property claims against each other – and not everyone does. As noted, my interpretation diverges from more mainstream readings in the literature according to which nomads either have a coercible duty of state entrance or must be presumed, as Ripstein himself suggests, already to be in some form of civil union with some form of property regime. For Ripstein, recall, the circuitous argument which I pursue in relation to Kant’s nomadic encounter would not have been necessary had I accorded a substantive innate right to all persons, including nomads as well as adopting a sufficiently general notion of property rights regimes that would have allowed me to class nomadic societies under it. Okeja is more sympathetic to my circuitous reading. As he notes, in summarizing it, it is of some importance to my interpretation that ‘Kant does not resolve the issue’. By this, I did not mean that ‘try as he might he fails to resolve it’; Okeja rightly says that “what Flikschuh means is that [Kant] acknowledges the tension without trying to resolve it” (Okeja 2019, 93). This is of importance in that it is suggestive of Kant’s ability to acknowledge the limits of his own thinking when confronted by cultures and cultural practices whose unfamiliarity to him he precisely does not resolve by simply translating them into his own conceptual frame.

Okeja himself spends some time setting out the interpretive differences between myself and that of Anna Stilz, whose view on Kant’s nomadic encounter is broadly in line with Ripstein’s suggestion that we should think of the nomads as laying some sort of property claims to the lands over which they roam – from which their duty of state entrance then follows. For Okeja, “the striking point is the very fact of a divergence of interpretation of an important text in the Western tradition of philosophy by philosophers embedded in that tradition.” (*ibid.*, 94) Okeja goes on

to say that the reason for this divergence cannot simply be the fact that philosophers tend to disagree with one another. Of course, one might respond by saying that interpretive disagreement reflects either obscurities and resulting ambivalences on Kant's part or defects of a similar kind among interpreters of his writings. But I think we can take all that as given – Okeja's point stands even if we take those more humdrum reasons into account. For Okeja, interpretive disagreements are indicative of the endeavour to forge a "usable past."

What does it mean to forge or create a "usable past"? The basic thought concerns, I think, one's reliance on one's (cultural and philosophical) past when reflecting on a possible future. Key to the past's being rendered 'usable' is thus a concern for the future. This thought is elegantly expressed in Kwame Gyekye's appeal to the Akan Sankofa symbol, which Okeja does not mention but which fits with his own comments on constructing a 'usable past'. The Sankofa symbol depicts a large bird which, standing in forward (future-oriented) position, turns its long neck and beak back (to the past) to pick up a fallen seed that would otherwise be left behind. Sankofa thus expresses the importance of taking the past forward into the future. Without a past to guide one, there is no possible future. The relevance to the African post-colonial context is evident, but the point holds more generally: anyone who is not convinced should consider for a moment the UK's reluctance to shed its monarchical traditions; the US' almost mythical devotion to its founding fathers, or France's ardent attachment to the ideals of the revolution. But how, more precisely, does Okeja conceive the connection between the African philosophical search for a "usable past" and my reading of Kant's nomadic encounter? Okeja says that:

while the African philosopher is absorbed in attempting to transform a denigrated past into a usable future, it can be said that the Western philosopher is engrossed in finding a way to transform the baggage of her predominantly written corpus into a usable past in light of current global realities. (Okeja 2019, 99).

I think this is exactly right – what is more, I hadn't realized that this is what I was attempting to do when I interpreted Kant's nomadic encounter in the way I did in chapter 3 of *WOT*. In a sense, it mattered less to me that Kant's own thinking actually was as I interpreted it and more that his writings could plausibly be interpreted in that way. Even if Kant did not himself regard the nomads as under no duty of state entrance – even if he did think of their use of the lands as amounting to a property relation of sorts – the text is sufficiently complex to allow for a different line of inquiry. And it was of course important to me to use what I diagnosed as Kant's own dilemma – the sense of being pulled up short by the nomadic encounter – as one that might be sufficiently like ours ('us liberals') for us to be guided by what I took to be Kant's response (letting the tension stand).

There are two associated thoughts which I have in response to Okeja's notion of a "usable past". The first is that creating a usable past can end up being either a more or a less illustrious business. Everyone knows that Leopold von Ranke, the 'inaugurator' of history as a methodical discipline, proclaimed to focus on the question of "*wie es eigentlich gewesen ist*" (how it actually was). The demand is that one be guided by the facts, not by fancy. But everyone also knows how thin the dividing line is between facts and fancy: one person's facts turn out to be another's fancy. Western philosophers, for instance, once believed it to be a fact that negroes were of inferior intelligence. Today we like to think that we believe these purported facts to have been those

philosophers' fancy. Yet what we take to be the facts today may similarly turn out to be fancies further down the line. Is a usable past built on facts or on fancies, and can we even tell the difference?

I suspect that much of what Rorty advertises about his country's having achieved itself might be fancy more than fact; I suspect that, in general, the construction of a usable past is a somewhat hazardous enterprise: one's concern to find a guide for the future may lead one to end up revealing in the glories of a more or less imaginary past. This is not to disavow the importance of Okeja's point, only to ensure that it is taken in the right spirit. In creating a "usable past" it may matter less that we appeal to facts rather than fancy and more that we do not mistake fancy for facts. The Western notion of history, including its philosophical history, strikes me as severely compromised in this regard: much of its purported facts remain fancies at least in part. In short, the danger of creating a "fanciful past" in the effort to create a usable one is ever-present and worth keeping critically in the forefront of one's mind.

My second comment relates to textual interpretation; it basically parallels my first comment. I agree with Okeja that we can and should employ the resources of written and oral traditions with a view to their possible guidance both in the presence and for the future. That said, I do not believe that we can 'rewrite' these texts in just any way we please – nor do I believe that Okeja would endorse the latter. On the one hand, it seems to me fanciful ever to claim to be in a position to say exactly what the author of a given text intended – it is difficult enough to ascertain what he or she may plausibly be said to have argued. I nonetheless do think that the interpreter should attempt systematically plausible readings of a given text. Again, the precise criteria for systematic plausibility are difficult to fix: as noted in my response to Olivier's

contribution, for example, I myself believe that no reading of Kant is systematically plausible that does not accept his commitment to transcendental idealism as a necessary interpretive constraint. I concede, however, that not all Kant interpreters share this view and I think there is room for reasonable disagreement. Nonetheless, there must be a difference between legitimate attempts at creating a “usable past” out of a canonical text and a mere ransacking of such texts with a view to underwriting one’s current prejudices.

I want also to respond to Okeja’s second major notion – that of conceptual repair. Again, this strikes me as an instructive extension of my own exploration of conceptual loss and disorientation. As with creating a usable past, so conceptual repair seems to me prominent, if often implicitly so, in much current African philosophy. I take Okeja to have in mind a wider application, however. To the extent to which Okeja thinks the creation of a usable past a joint endeavour, albeit worked at from different ends, the demands of conceptual repair must apply to philosophical thinking in general. Okeja says that while African philosophers attempt to transform a denigrated past into a usable past, Western philosophers should transform aspects of their philosophical tradition into a usable tradition. These endeavours intersect: the denigration of the African cultural and intellectual past is part of the baggage of the Western tradition. Although this is increasingly recognized in some domains of Western philosophical thinking, the overwhelming tendency still is to chalk this up to marginal mistakes of the past. The fact that much conceptual baggage is often being carried forward is overlooked even as individual past thinkers in the canon are held to account for their racist or colonial views. As Okeja says, “in looking at the conceptual adjustments that occurred in Africa due to the colonial project of uncritically extending, or as Wiredu puts it, superimposing Western concepts and ideals, it is necessary that

global normative theorizing recognizes the damaging consequences involved in this experience” (Okeja 2019, 103).

There is then a systematic connection between the endeavour to create a usable past on the one hand and the need for conceptual repair on the other hand; the two go hand in hand. In modern African philosophy, the initial debate to some extent continues as to what about the past is ‘real’ or ‘genuine’ and what about the past is itself colonial construction. Similarly, there is debate as to whether drawing on a pre-colonial past – to the extent to which this is even possible – is in fact useful for a post-colonial future. These are intractable questions but they are not futile; they are a necessary element of creating usable pasts. Equally, engagement with Western philosophy strikes me as critical given the place and image of the African continent in the Western philosophical imagination. But that engagement cannot be one-way – at some point Western thinkers will have to begin seriously to engage with the problem of philosophical exclusion in their tradition, and addressing that problem will have to involve giving serious philosophical consideration to concepts, beliefs, and values outside the purview of the Western tradition. There can be no conceptual retrieval, revision, and repair in modern African thought if there is none in Western philosophical thinking. African and Western philosophy are too intimately interlinked for the one to ignore the other: Western philosophical exclusion necessitated the invention of African philosophy; taking the latter seriously is indispensable to any genuine attempt to rectify such exclusion.

London School of Economics

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